

Newtowne Neck

A slice of history

By Geoff Carton, Kathy Ciolfi, Scott Lawrence

Declared by 19th century Jesuit Priest Father William Treacy, “one of the most hallowed spots on this continent,” Newtowne Neck State Park and the adjacent St. Francis Xavier Church are rich with history closely tied to the founding principles and struggles for the independence of our nation.



St. Francis Xavier Church

Early history

Archaeologists discovered evidence of habitation on Newtowne Neck dating back as early as 4000 BC. The Neck was occupied by the Piscataway tribe, who largely relied on fishing and raising a humble crop of beans, maize and tobacco. Writings and archaeological evidence indicate that the European and Native American people shared the land for a short time after the Europeans arrived early in the 17th century.

Maryland beginnings

In 1640, Leonard Calvert, the first Proprietary Governor of Maryland, originally granted Newtowne Neck to William Bretton, the first clerk of the Council of the Lower House of the Maryland Assembly. He was also a planter, *Burgess* (legislator), lawyer, judge, even a coroner. After Bretton’s acquisition, Newtowne became the first

established town outside the confines of St. Mary’s City.

Jesuit priests began activities in the area the same year Bretton acquired the Neck. Mr. Bretton, a staunch Catholic, donated land to Jesuits in 1661 for a church and graveyard. Father Henry Warren purchased the 700-acre Newtowne estate in 1668 for 40,000 pounds of tobacco. The Jesuits ministered to the local population and to people many miles away who were sick, elderly or too far away to travel for church.

Religious turmoil

Maryland was considered a bastion of religious freedom, and early on, Catholics and Protestants coexisted, though with some friction. While Maryland was well ahead of other colonies with respect to religious tolerance, things changed after the Orange Rebellion of 1688, when Protestants ultimately banned public worship by Catholics. This intolerance grew, culminating with the Maryland Assembly passing a law in 1704 to prevent the growth of Popery. In essence, this re-stricted Catholics from openly practicing their religion and made it illegal to maintain churches and schools. All Catholic public worship and private education at Newtowne Neck effectively ceased.

After the closure of the chapel in 1704, worship by Catholics could only be conducted in private homes. Around this time, a chapel was attached to Newtowne manor to allow worship in compliance with the law. As suppression relaxed, a new church was built about a half a mile from the site of the original.

Built in 1731, it is the same church that holds services today and is perhaps the oldest active Catholic Parish in the nation. A large brick manor house was also constructed at this time. Although it no longer exists, its foundation was located and partially excavated in the early 1980s.

Despite the struggles of daily life and renewed religious persecution, the residents of Newtowne appeared to lead a peaceful life during the mid 1700s. This lifestyle continued even with the onset of the Revolutionary War and British troops moving along the Potomac River.

Wartime and renovation

Local folklore tells of the Manor being ransacked by British troops. Father Treacy wrote that the Manor at Newtowne, “had its peace disturbed by red-coated soldiers who sometimes knocked in its doors with the butts of their villainous guns.” He also noted after each raid the food cellars needed to be replenished and the manor house repaired.

However, as soon as circumstances allowed, the Fathers opened the Manor “to heroes who fell wounded in the cause of their country” as a temporary hospital for the soldiers of 1776. There is no indication in his writings of how often the “red-coated” soldiers invaded the Manor.

It appears that the manor built in 1731 was damaged beyond repair (presumably by the British during the American Revolution). A new house was erected in 1789, which still stands today.



The current Manor House (right) was renovated in 1816, possibly a result of British actions during the war; one can clearly see that the roof had been raised and updated to its current style.



Recovered munitions

During the War of 1812, the British again disturbed the peace of the area — no public service was permitted at the church. On July 19, 1814, a detachment of British troops landed on Newtowne Neck to march on Leonardtown.

The Civil War seems to have affected the area to a lesser degree. Beyond a reference in the Eric Mills book, *Chesapeake Bay in the Civil War*, that an expeditionary force of 4,500 assembled in Newtowne in preparation for a raid



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on the Eastern shore of Virginia, little else is known.

World War II to present day

The State of Maryland acquired the entire peninsula, except the church and the manor house, in 2009. The land was purchased to preserve the area’s rich natural, cultural and historical heritage. In January of 2012, the property’s military significance became even more apparent with the discovery of several items of World War II-era *ordnance* (artillery) within the park.

It has now been established that during the Second World War, a gate was erected at Newtowne and guards barred access to the area. Nearby residents heard firing of large guns, but did not learn until later that testing of a top-secret weapon occurred there.

Between 1942 and 1947, testing of the *variable time fuze* occurred on the Neck

— a proximity fuze that caused a munition to detonate as it approached its target. This device helped neutralize German rocket attacks on London and Japanese kamikaze attacks in the Pacific, and was credited by General George Patton with the winning of the Battle of the Bulge.

The Navy relinquished the property in 1947, after which the Corporation of Roman Catholic Clergymen leased the majority of it to individuals for farming before the State purchased the land.

Upon unearthing the facts in 2012, the Neck was closed and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers conducted an exhaustive study to determine the nature and extent of prior military use. The Corps determined that the ordnance was inert test artillery rounds containing no explosive material, and therefore was not a danger to the visiting public.

The park — including its 776 acres of woodlands, wetlands and agricultural fields, and more than 7 miles of Potomac River shoreline in St. Mary’s County — reopened this year for visitors’ enjoyment.

The history of Newtowne Neck State Park tells the story of a landmark that has survived both religious persecution as well as fierce, famous Maryland battles. In addition to its rich past, the Park also offers the opportunity to hike, fish, paddle or simply relax within this scenic Southern Maryland gem. ■

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